

STRATEGIC PATHWAYS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN ELEME.

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In the early 1980s, Eleme experienced a vibrant boom in cultural tourism, with masquerade performances forming the core of entertainment during the Christmas season.

Colourful displays at the Alesa Town Square remain memorable, featuring iconic masquerades such as Owu-ama, Oki, Arungo, Abah, Ofrima and others.

Moments when Owuama and Abah electrified the town square, sending spectators running in excitement, captured the communal spirit and cultural richness of Eleme.

The high height Ogale masquerade, popularly known as Owu Konkon, stood out as a symbol of cultural pride, while Alode, Aleto, Agbonchia, and neighbouring communities also hosted impressive masquerade events that sustained local engagement in subtle but meaningful ways.

This cultural landscape shifted with the rise of aggressive Pentecostal evangelism, which increasingly portrayed masquerade traditions as ungodly.

In response, church crusades and inter-community football tournaments were introduced during festive periods, intentionally displacing traditional masquerade celebrations across Eleme.

Over time, this transition created a tourism and entertainment vacuum.

Eleme indigenes in the diaspora and residents returning from Port Harcourt during festive seasons often expressed frustration over the absence of structured recreational and tourism activities within the Eleme community.

By the early 1990s, neighbouring Okrika communities began organizing beach parties and carnivals, offering a compelling alternative for the people of Eleme to travel outside for tourism.

Consequently, Eleme's festive life became dominated by football tournaments and religious programmes, compelling many socially inclined Eleme youths and families to seek leisure experiences outside their homeland.

The launch of the Calabar Carnival by Governor Donald Duke further intensified outbound tourism from Eleme, as Eleme families increasingly travelled to Calabar for the carnival.

Social media platforms soon reflected this shift, with widespread visibility of Eleme families celebrating Calabar Carnival on Facebook etc.

A strategic turning point emerged when social innovators within Eleme began replicating Calabar carnival models locally within Eleme.

Initiatives such as the Onne (Ekara) Carnival, Okerewa Carnival, Alesa Unity Carnival, Ogale Carnival and the LGA Chairman's Cup marked early steps toward rebuilding Eleme's tourism and entertainment ecosystem.

Among these initiatives, the Ogale Carnival, Ekara Carnival, and Okerewa Carnival represent the most significant strides toward sustainable tourism development in Eleme.

Collectively, they demonstrate Eleme's capacity to host large-scale cultural events capable of attracting visitors and stimulating local economic activity.

From a strategic development perspective, a coordinated merger or integration of the Okerewa, Ogale, and Ekara Carnivals could position Eleme as home to one of the largest carnivals in Rivers State.

Such alignment would significantly reduce outbound tourism, retain cultural capital, and channel tourism revenue back into the Eleme economy.

Looking ahead, Eleme's tourism and entertainment industry holds strong potential to stimulate hospitality growth, promote social cohesion, encourage innovation, increase real estate value, and create employment opportunities.

Furthermore, the free-of-charge local zoo that existed between 1980 and 1995 at Alesa, owned by Elder Wuwu Gbaa Athanasius Ogboe, was ultimately a casualty of limited innovation and the absence of institutional sponsorship.

Located within his compound near the Alesa Town Square, the zoo housed a variety of animals and became a major attraction, especially during the Christmas season.

Children, filled with festive excitement, routinely visited the compound to see and interact with the animals.

Elder Wuwu Gbaa, an Adventist and a social entrepreneur, derived great joy from watching children engage with the animals.

For this reason, access to the zoo was completely free.

Unfortunately, neither corporate organizations nor the local government council at the time recognized the initiative's potential or invested in expanding it into a structured commercial and tourism enterprise.

As the saying goes, better late than never. The Eleme community today deserves a modern zoo, one capable of housing elephants, lions, horses and a wide range of animal species.

Eleme's strategic location makes this vision highly feasible. The area hosts major industrial and commercial entities, including Intel Oil Services, Indorama Petrochemical, the Port Harcourt Refinery Complex, and the NPA Onne Wharf, alongside thousands of other businesses.

This concentration of activity underscores Eleme's vast tourism potential. An innovative and well-managed zoo in Eleme could conservatively generate ₦15 million per month.

In addition, the establishment of a museum in Eleme would significantly enhance cultural tourism.

Such a museum would attract large numbers of visitors, driven by festivals, rich cultural heritage, historical warlords and pioneer founders, the Biafra War, pre-colonial economic artefacts, records of slave trade activities, and other related historical materials.

A properly curated museum could generate approximately ₦10 million per month in Eleme.

This research therefore recommends that both the zoo and the museum be located within the Otour Eleme premises. The presence of a nearby police station guarantees tourist security, while the Otour Eleme Hall already attracts thousands of people during events at the Hall, providing a ready audience and ensuring sustained visitor traffic.

However, achieving these outcomes requires deliberate long-term planning, sustained sponsorship, and institutional collaboration involving the Eleme Local Government Council, philanthropists, and corporate organizations operating within Eleme.

Available research estimates the annual value of the Eleme Tourism and Entertainment Industry at approximately ₦35 billion per year. With strategic planning and immediate policy action, Eleme leadership can leverage this opportunity to attract investors and establish tourism as a viable pillar of sustainable development.

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